



Enhancing Services for Students with Mild Disabilities in the Middle East Gulf Region: A Kuwait Initiative

Yasser A. Al-Hilawani
Kourtland R. Koch
Sheldon R. Braaten

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Abstract

At a conference, titled: "Childhood Disabilities: Assessment and Early Intervention" held between March 20-22, 2006, at Kuwait University, a range of discussion topics were considered that would enhance and design specific best practices in special education for the Middle East Arab Gulf region. Governmental representatives, post-secondary educators, educational specialist, teachers, administrators, parents and concerned citizens grappled with past, current and future educational practices in an attempt to enhance educational services for students with special needs in the Middle East Arab Gulf region. Five distinct topical areas focused on assessment and diagnosis, early intervention, educational strategies, professional development and community awareness as areas of importance. Keynote speakers were drawn from educational specialists in the Middle East Arab Gulf region as well as selected individuals with expertise in best practices from the United States. As a result of the presentations and discussions, recommendations were compiled for implementation.

Keywords

special education services, mild disabilities, Middle East Gulf Region

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Introduction

On March 22-26, 2006, a conference on disabilities in the Middle East Arab Gulf (MEAG) region, titled “Childhood Disabilities: Assessment and Early Intervention” (Department of Educational Psychology, 2006), was held at Kuwait University, Shuwaikh Campus, located in close proximity to Kuwait City, Kuwait. It was under the auspices of his Highness, the Prime Minister Shaik Nasar Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and hosted by the Department of Educational Psychology in the College of Education (COE). This conference was jointly funded by Kuwait Airways, Kuwait University and the General Secretariat of Awqaf Affairs. Awqaf means Philanthropic or Charitable Endowment. It was superceded by a conference in 1997 held at United Arab Emirates (UAE) University, which focused on the training of teachers to apply accurate assessment and diagnostic data to daily teaching practices. The 2006 conference focused specifically on assessment and diagnosis, early intervention, educational strategies, professional development and community awareness.

The purpose of this article is to report on the 2006 conference, provide historical perspective and background information, summarize the participants' recommendations and give some authors' conclusions. Special education in the MEAG region has been evolving slowly and only in the last ten to twelve years come to the forefront in education. This 2006 conference focused on a range of special education concerns. At the conclusion of the conference, the participants gathered to prepare a recommended list of objectives to move the special education field ahead in the MEAG region.

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Middle East Arab Gulf Region

Background and Context

Historically, children with disabilities in the MEAG region have been either excluded or have not received adequate services from the public schools. The lack of services has forced parents to find assistance in the private sector, often at their expense. This is in a culture where efforts have been to hide individuals with disabilities from society. Families are faced with the negative consequences of labeling their children. Identification and disclosure carry significant social consequences to such a degree that some families, especially those with children of low incidence disabilities, are more likely to keep them at home and hidden from society. Strong cultural and religious observance may require many years for the population to develop an understanding of individuals with disabilities.

As a result, during the last ten years, some progress has been made through educational initiatives and government actions.

Legal Aspects

To our knowledge, the passage of a law in 1996 by Kuwait was the first in the MEAG region to have a plan to protect the rights of children and adults with disabilities and was intended to provide services for independence. The law addressed terminology such as “disabled” and “rehabilitation services” and included housing specifications, rehabilitation centers, disability pensions, monthly allowances, and employment assistance. However, the law did not address issues related to definition, eligibility, assessment or placement options. In the decade since its passage, anecdotal evidence from individuals with disabilities indicates that requirements in the law have not been strictly enforced. Public and

governmental institutions have been more likely in compliance than private facilities. To date, this law has served as a catalyst in promoting the rights of the disabled, although it has not brought about the necessary changes to improve the quality of life for children and adults with disabilities.

Previous Conference, 1997

In May 1997, an effort to address the concerns in the MEAG region was a conference, “Diagnosis in Special Education,” organized by the Special Education Department in the College of Education at UAE University. This MEAG region multinational conference was initiated to exchange information and expertise on training teachers to employ accurate assessment and diagnostic data for determination of services. One conference objective was to present the essential knowledge to implement a diagnostic clinic that would provide educational services to (UAE) students with special needs. Strong evidence was emerging that the effectiveness of early intervention programs was influencing professionals to identify students as soon as possible before school failure occurred. Topics related to early intervention assessment were key areas addressed during the 1997 conference. Invited speakers from the United States (US) with expertise in the area of assessment and teaching presented along with other participants from various countries: Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen. Featured speakers from the US included George Hynd from Georgia State University, who shared information on the use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging technology in the diagnosis of learning disabilities (LD) and Joyce Choate from Northeast Louisiana University participated via phone conference addressing the topic of teaching and curriculum-based assessment.

Joyce Choate’s participation was recommended by James Poteet from Ball State University to enrich the conference and was sponsored by the American Embassy in the UAE. The 1997 conference brought concepts related to assessment and intervention which initiated some change in special education. At that time, students in the College of Education at UAE University, except those majoring in special education, were not required to study the course Education of Exceptional Children or Introduction to Special Education.

Influence from 1997 Conference on Universities

By 1999, the College of Education started restructuring its programs in pursuit of academic accreditation from an international organization. The choice was to use the standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) for this purpose. To receive NCATE accreditation from an international organization, the college had to implement principles of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, which required preparing teachers for diverse learners to include children with special needs. To meet this requirement, the course Education of Exceptional Children became a requirement for all students enrolled in any program for teacher preparation in the College of Education. In the Fall of 2000, all students admitted into the College of Education at UAE University were to follow the newly constructed study program and complete the course to meet NCATE standards. In 2005, the College of Education at UAE University had been evaluated by the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education – (CQAIE). The College of Education at UAE University received recognition by CQAIE in cooperation with NCATE, the

first international recognition of a university in the region.

Some educational movement was instituted in the areas of teaching, expansion of faculty members and the promotion of community awareness. By 2002, the COE at Kuwait University took the initiative to reform its programs according to NCATE Standards. Before restructuring its programs for accreditation purposes, not all teacher preparation programs in the COE at Kuwait University required that pre-service teachers complete the course Education of Exceptional Children. This introductory course in special education was required only for those students majoring in kindergarten education (early childhood education in the US). Majors in elementary, middle, and high school education were not expected to take this course. The misconception was that students with special needs were not to be educated in the school system since they were not capable of acquiring higher learning skills. If there were any learning problems, they would exist only at the elementary level.

In response to an apparent need to insure the rights and educational needs of special education students, a decision by the COE at Kuwait University was made to recruit a faculty member with expertise in the field of LD. This faculty member's responsibility was to assist in the development and to teach a one-year certification program to educate students with disabilities. The program was designed to attract students with either a B.A. or a B.S. degree in any discipline. Also, it provided in-service for teachers with a non-special education degree who had responsibilities for teaching students with disabilities. A primary purpose of the program was to address misconceptions about students with dis-

abilities and to establish greater support and training of general education teachers. Currently, the COE is considering substituting the one-year proposed program into an M.A. degree in special education. Other initiatives undertaken were to increase professional and community awareness by providing early intervention services and in-service training that would ultimately lead to better educational outcomes for all students regardless of their handicapping condition.

Other changes noted in the MEAG region included the countries of Egypt (Ain Shams University), Jordan (The University of Jordan), Lebanon (Notre Dame University-Louaize-NDU), Bahrain (Arabian Gulf University), and Qatar (University of Qatar) offering diplomas (one year training after a B.A. degree), and M.A. degrees in special education, and a Ph.D. degree in education or mental health with emphasis in special education. In 1997, four countries were known to have well established

B.A. degrees in special education: Jordan (The University of Jordan), UAE (United Arab Emirates University), Saudi Arabia (King Saud University) and Bahrain (University of Bahrain). By the 2005-2006 school year, the list of countries offering a minor or a B.A. degree in special education included the countries of Oman (Sultan Qaboos University), Kuwait (College of Basic Education in The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training), Lebanon (American University of Beirut and Notre Dame University-Louaize-NDU), and Syria (Damascus University).

Influence from 1997 Conference on Special Education

In the decade following the first

MEAG region conference, much has remained unchanged. The concept of a "school psychologist" was that of a test administrator and data collector but not that of a "clinical diagnostician". Assessment and diagnosis information was likely collected by an individual with only a B.A. degree in psychology or sociology. Many students continued to be misdiagnosed with "mild mental retardation" or identified as "slow learners" as evidenced in anecdotal information. Apparently, those who were misdiagnosed were later labeled as educable mentally retarded (outdated terminology continues to be used in the region) and transferred from a neighborhood school to a special education center, often located far from home. If accurate diagnostic tools for identification and training were made available, these students might have been diagnosed as having a mild disability in reading, math, or both. Special education centers, placed under the authority and supervision of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, were created to provide educational services specifically for young children with physical, visual, mental, hearing loss and multiple disabilities.

Preparing teachers to meet the complex needs of special education students has been a pressing issue within the MEAG region. Few professionals are prepared to administer psychometric tests. Test administration, scoring and interpretation require training and expertise to determine performance outcomes. Although most teachers can readily administer or learn to administer group intelligence and achievement tests, extensive training on how to score and interpret these test results is essential. At present, individuals with little or no training are administering selected tests that have not been properly normed for the MEAG region. Because current assessment instruments used in the region do

not reflect the culture, specific goals and objectives are not reflective of prevailing cultural and societal views. Selective guidelines for implementing instruction or evaluating objectives contained in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) are either inaccurate or simply non-existent.

To date, some improvements in the educational services are offered by government and private schools to students labeled slow learners, and to those with LD, mild (or educable) and moderate (or trainable) mental handicaps. In Kuwait, students labeled slow learners are being served at all grade levels in regular schools but administered by the Ministry of Education in self-contained classrooms (SCC). Recently, some students with Down Syndrome have been integrated starting in kindergarten in selected schools which serve the general student population but they receive the majority of their education in SCC. Students with other disabling conditions (such as severe and profound mental handicaps, hearing losses, visual impairments, and autism) are typically educated in special government schools or centers which are overseen by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Some private schools have started serving both regular and special education students in the same school. Students typically served in these settings are those with mild and moderate mental retardation (educable and trainable mentally retarded) and those with LD. LD is the current term widely used in some private schools to replace the term "slow learning." However, the term "slow learning" is the official terminology being used in the Ministry of Education government schools. Educational services provided in special education do not reflect the philosophy of the COE at Kuwait University.

A growing commitment exists among post-secondary institutions and professionals

to provide more effective special education services for students throughout the MEAG region. This effort may be attributed to increased understanding of the unique needs of the disabled population in the MEAG region as well as the passage of the legislative act in 1996 in Kuwait to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. A concerted effort among professionals at the post-secondary level has continued to heighten awareness, access, and participation in special education programs. Extensive and continuing discussions have focused on issues related to assessment and diagnosis, early intervention, educational strategies, professional development and community awareness.

In 2004, discussions by the COE at Kuwait University centered on the apparent need to host a second MEAG region conference. This initiative was undertaken in response to a continuing desire to design instructional programs for teachers who were responsible for providing services to children with special needs. Neighboring countries in the MEAG region called for in-service training of teachers, guidance in the development and administration of assessment instruments, and the design of education models for the delivery of intended services.

2006 Kuwait University Conference

The 2006 Kuwait University conference was held on the Shuwaikh University campus in close proximity to Kuwait City, from March 22 - 26, 2006. This conference, entitled "Childhood Disabilities: Assessment and Early Intervention," focused on early intervention and the apparent high incidence

rate among students with mild disabilities. The purpose was to focus specifically on mild disabilities which represented the largest portion of students served in government schools. Attendees from a number of countries in the MEAG were government officials, college and university faculty, administration and staff, teachers from both public and private institutions and parents of children with disabilities. They brought a wide range of expertise in areas such as psychological and educational perspectives, roles of family and schools, metacognitive strategies as well as general education. Invited speakers from Egypt, Jordan, and the U.S. reflected expertise and best practice in assessment, early intervention, individual education plans, professional development, and community awareness. Other presenters offered topics on a wide range from selected case studies to the need for early identification of children with LD. Similar to the 1997 conference, presiders with papers reflecting the topics and objectives of the 2006 conference were invited to participate in this educational gathering. Invited participants came from the countries of Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Algeria, UAE, and the A 90-minute featured speaker provided in-depth information on a given topic each day. Conference attendees were afforded the opportunity to meet with the featured expert immediately following the presentation. The conference format had selected speakers present their papers, followed by a short question and answer period. While afternoons were typically breakout sessions and workshops. Simultaneous translation was provided to ensure accuracy of the wording of the presenta-

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tions.

COE at Kuwait University designed the 2006 conference to focus on assessment and early intervention in childhood disabilities. In attempting to maintain its educational initiatives, the Department selected the title of the conference, "Childhood Disabilities: Assessment and Early Intervention," for two reasons. First, screening for disabilities in early stages of childhood development seemed critical. Second, recent history suggested that evolving developments in information, instruments, and strategies should be in the forefront to reflect the participants' concerns. From these, the Department developed four conference objectives:

1. To conduct scientific and intellectual communications as well as to exchange information and experiences between researchers and professionals in assessment and early intervention in childhood disabilities.
2. To introduce the latest and new practices in assessment and early intervention in childhood disabilities.
3. To highlight the importance of assessment and early intervention in childhood disabilities.
4. To highlight the role of families, schools, and community organizations in assessment and early intervention in childhood disabilities. (Department of Educational Psychology, 2006).

Because of priorities in the COE, the area of assessment and diagnosis of childhood disabilities was first and was also placed first in the conference title. Next, early intervention was addressed because of the anecdotal and statistical data indicating

that this measure could significantly change the world of disabilities. Built from the first two concepts, remediation and prevention procedures could provide teachers with some specific information addressing these concerns. Also, consideration was given to field practices and applications which could be employed on a daily basis to assist children in their daily academic requirements. Finally, speakers were invited to present on the role of families, schools, and professional and community organizations to further the understanding to promote the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Both keynote and featured speakers established the tone of the conference. They addressed the role of the resource room in the public school using adaptive behavior scales for evaluation, best practice in assessment and intervention with emotional and behavioral disorders, interpreting data for planning, and perspectives on LD using assessment and intervention data. Other conference speakers gave presentations that were organized into five main topics: assessment and diagnosis, early intervention, educational strategies, professional development, and community service.

Table 1: Summation of Conference Outcomes

Conference Topics	Conference Participant Recommendations
<u>Assessment and Diagnosis</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Adopt international standards regarding assessment and diagnosis.2. Emphasize the legal, ethical, and professional aspects in assessment and diagnoses to protect the right of special education students for appropriate psychological and educational services.3. Organize training workshops for professional developments for those in charge of assessment and diagnosis.4. Develop valid and reliable assessment tools for mild disabilities to be used in Gulf countries.5. Emphasize the importance of conducting a comprehensive assessment and diagnosis procedure of children to include medical, mental, emotional, social, behavioral, and educational aspects.6. Implement the assessment strategy of connecting the diagnostic process with the child's Individual Education plan (IEP).7. Emphasize the role of the multi disciplinary team concerning assessment/diagnosis, educational placement, and follow-up services.8. Stress the importance of parental involvement and their understanding of the multi disciplinary evaluation team's purpose by providing information concerning their child's academic and behavior in both social and learning situations.9. Emphasize the role of the school psychologist, sociologist, and other supporting specialists in preparation of an IEP.10. Train teachers to effectively utilize the referral method for those suspected as having a mild disability.
<u>Early Intervention</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Pursue efforts to issue appropriate laws for the care of individuals with special needs at all age levels.2. Ensure that early intervention strategies are focused on current best practices, which relate to international diagnostic criteria and procedures.3. Organize training workshops to enhance parental skills in the care of young children with special needs.4. Support legislative laws regarding pre-marriage tests and during pregnancy to avoid possible childhood disabilities.5. Integrating within early intervention programs artistic, recreation activities, and daily living skills.6. Include within kindergarten and elementary teacher preparation programs courses in assessment and diagnosis, early intervention, and preventative and remediation educational and psychological strategies related to children with disabilities
<u>Educational Strategies</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Stress the importance of designing and implementing IEP's with special emphasis on counseling, educational services as well as related services concerning the care and education of the child.2. Emphasize the importance of getting parents involved in the development of their child's IEP when first identified.3. Stress the importance of the integration between the roles of family and the multi disciplinary evaluation team in implementing and following up on the child's IEP.
<u>Professional Development</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Increase community social awareness and the enhancement of positive attitudes which support the rights of individuals with special needs.2. Develop parental skills in dealing with stress related disabilities and improve the child-parent functional interaction.3. Train in-service teachers on some counseling skills appropriate for dealing with children with special education needs through using activities and education experiences.4. Emphasize the importance of inclusion and the availability of appropriate educational environment.5. Focus on the importance of developing social, academic, and problem solving skills in children with special needs in school environment.
<u>Community Awareness</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Help activate the role of various mass media to make the community aware of the importance of showing interest and care for those with special needs.2. Emphasize the role of community civic organizations and non-profit societies in providing effective services to children with special needs.3. Conduct studies and research concerning the prevalence of disabilities to be the base for planning and providing appropriate community services.

Recommendations From Conference Participants: Special Education Issues

At the conclusion of the 2006 conference, a discussion with participants was held and a comprehensive list of suggestions was developed. The resulting recommendations echoed many of the same concerns identified at the conclusion of the 1997 conference held at the UAE University. The general population in the MEAG region evidently has become more aware of the various types of disabilities and the need for better services. Five specific areas emerging from the conference were synthesized (See Table 1). As conference sessions were underway, most participants began to note these concepts in dialogue. The breath and depth of these recommendations reflected the status of the field of special education among the participants.

Assessment and Diagnosis

Conference participants formulated a series of objectives to improve practice in assessment and diagnosis. These included the need to bring the MEAG region toward appropriate cultural criteria interrelated with evaluation instruments as well as have legal, ethical, and professional guidelines. Participants wanted to emphasize comprehensive child study using multidisciplinary teams to include parental involvement. Development of an IEP using assessment and diagnostic data from the team was included. Also, a referral method should begin the diagnostic process.

Early Interventions

The success of early intervention and preventative strategies was seen by participants to rely on the effectiveness of teacher training programs for pre-service and in-service teachers responsible for providing in-

struction to special needs students in K-5. Specific objectives centering on best practices included assessment and diagnosis, preventative strategies, and remediation. Early intervention school programs should expand to include daily living, recreation and leisure, and the arts. Parental training workshops to heighten awareness of children with special needs should be provided. To ensure that all students with handicapping conditions receive early intervention services, a concerted effort to advocate for the passage of legislative acts was recommended. In addition, participants suggested that a law be passed which allows for either testing prior to marriage or during pregnancy to minimize selected childhood disabilities.

Educational Strategy

Participants stressed the importance of an IEP which particularly recognized related services involving care of the child. Concerns focused on a need to have parents included in the IEP process and in the preparation of the IEP document. Implementation of a procedure for continual follow-up on the child's IEP was emphasized.

Professional Development

In an attempt to enhance overall community awareness and teacher effectiveness pertaining to students with special needs, participants promoted activities which enhance the acquisition of positive attitudes. They wrote objectives for additional professional activities which stress counseling skills, parental skills training, and promoting inclusionary practices. Other staff development activities were specifically targeted for building upon the student's social/community awareness, problem solving ability, and general academic skills.

Community Awareness

Conference participants became aware of the a role for mass media in developing community understanding of those with handicapping conditions. Also, they emphasized the need to involve civic and non-profit organizations in providing services. Participants suggested conducting research as a basis to plan and provide for community services. In expanding community awareness, participants had the basis to bring positive change to their respective countries.

Conference participants were encouraged to take copies of the recommendations to their home countries. Since several nations were represented at the conference, each participant has the responsibility of initiating the recommended new practices to enhance the lives of individuals with disabilities, most particularly the children.

Authors' Conclusions

The conclusions offered by the authors may have an impact on this MEAG region to provide best practices in areas of assessment and diagnosis, early intervention, educational strategies, professional development, and community awareness. For students with special needs to succeed academically in the MEAG region, teachers will need to become familiar with typical academic problems often faced by these students. Teachers must be able to provide assistance in adapting instructional procedures which are intended to meet the needs of the individual student. As assessment and diagnosis issues unique to the MEAG region were considered, particular areas evolved. The adoption of international standards for assessment and diagnosis may be difficult to achieve initially due to the con-

fusion that exists among the professionals in the region specifically terminology and conceptualization of mild disabilities. Specific standards concerning valid and reliable assessment tools based upon MEAG regional norms may face considerable difficulty due to cultural differences from that of Western norms. They must reflect the cultural differences among the countries themselves.

The central tenant in the design of any IEP may require assurances that parents are afforded access to all available information concerning their child's educational programming. These assurances would ensure that not only appropriate decisions are being made, but optimal ones as well. All teachers including the general education teacher should be encouraged to participate on the multidisciplinary team. All participants should keep in mind that assessment results are intended to help IEP committee members make decisions and develop

specific goals and objectives or benchmarks that will support the academic needs of the child.

We determined in this conference that many educational professionals in the MEAG region receive their advanced degree training from institutions located in the US. Upon returning to their respective countries, these individuals will face great difficulty in applying western cultural norms, values, and demographics to norms typically reflective of their home nation. Can the continuation of the current practice of training professionals in the US effectively enhance their ability to assimilate best practices in their respective region?

Conference participants recognized the obligation universities have to develop and coordinate support services which ad-

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dress the needs of children with handicapping conditions whether in school, community, or family. Conference recommendations identified the importance of providing training at both the pre-service and in-service levels. This may require cooperation and coordination to design programs which draw upon a variety of disciplines and professions. Post-secondary educational programs and in-service training should be complementary and support emerging concepts which reflect the needs of the MEAG region. Further cooperation among schools, families and the private sector should be encouraged to form working relationships to ensure a variety of services are available during after school hours to support social development, academic and recreational leisure pursuits.

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About the Authors:

Yasser A. Al-Hilawani is Associate Professor of Special Education, Department of Educational Psychology, Kuwait University.

Kourtland Koch is Associate Professor of Special Education, Department of Special Education, Ball State University.

Sheldon Braaten is Professor of Special Education, Executive Director of the Behavioral Institute for Children and Adolescents, MN.